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ABSTRACT

Intended as a supplementary resource for teachers, this paper focuses on using humor to develop students' critical thinking and reading abilities. The paper suggests many newspaper humor activities for predicting word meanings through context clues, including the meanings of words in isolation and in context, in headlines, and in the comics. Next, the paper lists activities that teach inferencing with "W" and "H" questions (What? Why? When? Where? Who? and How?). The paper concludes with activities that show how newspaper humor can be developed as a tool for critical analysis of facts, opinions, and propaganda. (EL)

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NEWSPAPER HUMOR: TOOL FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND READING ABILITIES

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Summary Statement: Newspaper humor may be used as an effective tool in developing critical thinking and reading abilities. This article suggests many newspaper humor actvities for predicting word meanings through context clues, inferencing with the five "Ws" and "H" questions, and critically analyzing ideas.

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NEWSPAPER HUMOR: A TOOL FOR TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING

Newspaper humor is a motivating and effective supplementary resource for teaching critical thinking and reading. The Reading Report Card: Progress toward Excellence in Our Schools, summarizing results of The National Assessement of Educational Progress, reported that while nine year old students had improved in reading ability from 1970-1984, seventeen year olds had declined ten percent in their ability to interpret and to think about their reading.

Headlines such as, "Johnny Can Read All Right; He Just Can't Think!" have reflected public concern about students' inability to think. Schools, in response to criticisms, have launched intensive efforts to improve thinking skills. However, newspaper humor integrated into the curriculum may be a motivating alternative to formal courses and commercial materials for teaching thinking. For example, consider the thinking skills required in the interpretation of the following articles for motivating discussion in a high school social science class.

Parable of the Isms

Socialism: If you have two cows, you give one to your neighbor. Communism: If you have two cows you give them both to the government and the government then gives you some milk. Fascism: If you have two cows, you keep the cows and give the milk to the government; then the government sells you some milk. New Dealism: If you have two cows, you shoot one and milk the other; then you pour the milk down the drain. Nazism: If you have two cows, the government shoots you and keep the cows. Capitalism: If you have two cows, you sell one and buy a bull.

--Supervision

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Conservatives who mourned the departure of Jeane Kirkpatrick as America's ambassador to the United Nations can take heart. Her successor, Vernon Walters, also refuses to apologize for America's enemies. In a recent statement, Walters said that Cuba is the biggest country in the world because its government is in Havana, its administration in Moscow, its army in Angola and its people in Miami.

-- Pikes Pique

This article provides many activities for using newpaper humor to teach and reinforce critical thinking and reading abilities including: predictive, contextual vocabulary development; inferencing with the 5 "Ws"; and critical analysis of ideas.

NEWSPAPER HUMOR: TOOL FOR PREDICTING WORD MEANINGS

Since concept and vocabulary development are basic to reading comprehension, prediction through the use of context clues is an important foundation for critical reading and thiking. Some vocabulary activities, using newspaper humor include:

Predicting Meanings of Words in Isolation and in Context

(1) List selected vocabulary words on chalkboard or overhead projector. Pronounce and guess at meanings by associating known parts of a word. Humorous guesses may result from attempting to define words in isolation.

(2) Read the words in context to check the accuracy of predictions. The meaning of "scofflaw" may be confirmed by the newspaper headline, "Parking Scofflaws Get Tagged". Discuss how context clarifies meanings.

Predicting Multiple-Meanings of Words from Headlines

Newspaper humor often originates from ambiguous uses of multiple meaning words. For example, the headline, "A Clear Case of Bank Robbery" becomes clear as one reads further or scans the accompanying photo to discover the spring run-off has washed away a bank of the Arkansas River. Little confusion results from the meaning of the headline,"Wind-Damage Claims Mounting in Pueblo". However, the word, "mounting" is ambiguous in a Salt Lake City newspaper's headline which appeared in response to the wide-spread problem of teen-age pregnancy in Utah last year: "Problem of Teen-age Pregnancy is Mounting!" Newspaper humor involving multiple meaning words may include activities such as:

(1) Creating a bulletin board from headlines containing ambiguous multiple meaning words or by writing new headlines to illustrate other meanings of the words by changing the context.

(2) Reading sports page headlines using figurative expressions. For example, "Pats Electrocute Colts!" "Irish, Lions Encore?" "Battered Falcons, Baylor Match Ills!" Tell who won or lost; write or illustrate other possible meanings for the figurative expressions.

Predicting Word Meanings from the Comics

Comics provide excellent sources for contextual vocabulary development. Meanings of words such as "cultivated", "manipulated", and "taunted" may be predicted from context. Enjoyable vocabulary activities from the comics include:

(1) Rewriting the dialogue of a comic strip written in non-standard English with standard English. Discuss reasons for the character's saying it the way he does.

(2) Blocking out predictable words in a comic strip and inserting words which make sense. Compare students' predictions to the words used in the text.

(3) Developing a comics tic-tac-toe game by writing a dictionary definition on one side of a card. On the other side of the card, paste the caption containing the word. If the student can correctly define the word from context, a space on the tic-tac-toe game may be marked with "O" or "X".

(4) Reproducing a comic bingo by drawing sixteen squares--four across and four down on a piece of paper. Choose sixteen or more vocabulary words from comic strips. Read captions containing the word. Students write a synonym or antonym for the word in the appropriate square to complete the Bingo.

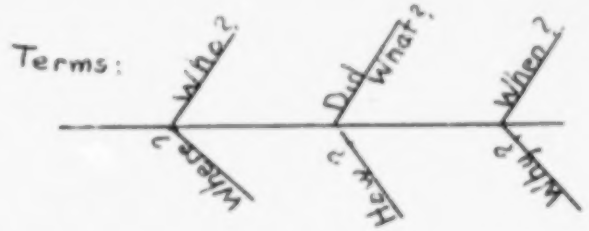
NEWSPAPER HUMOR: TOOL FOR INFERENCING WITH 5 "W" AND "H" QUESTIONS

I keep six honest serving men;
They taught me all they knew.
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.
--The Elephant's Child
by Rudyard Kipling

The six Kipling questions may provide practice in inferecing with humor found in news stories, features, comics, and cartoons.

Thinking and Predicting with News Stories and Feature Articles

(1) The Herringbone technique (Tierney, Readence, Dishner,1985) is helpful for older students. Reproduce the Herringbone as shown. Direct students to answer questions: Who or what was involved? What happened? When? Where? How? Why? State the main idea on the center line.



(2) To play Rim Rat's Dilemma, Burns (1984), explain that a rim rat writes headlines for newspapers. Cut out and mount interesting articles separated from the headlines. Ask students to pretend that they are rim rats. Match headlines with articles or cartoons with captions.

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(3) Use humorous feature columns to demonstrate how satire combines humor and underlying meanings which gently poke fun at society. For example, in "Last Tax Loophole Closed", Buchwald teasingly proposes a tax on jogging. Ann Landers pokes fun at the generation gap as she tells of a grandmother's inability to relate to her sixteen year old granddaughter who emptied her pockets to retrieve a pair of pliers to zip up her tight jeans. Read a satirical article to discuss multi-level meanings. Are the articles funny? Do they contain serious messages? How many hidden meanings can be found?

Thinking and Predicting with Comics and Cartoons

(1) After reading comics such as "Prince Valient", write predictions of what will happen in the next episode. Encourage students to confirm or reject their predictions by reading the next episode.

(2) Draw inferences about present day society or political problems from comics such as Peanuts, Bloom County, Little Orphan Annie, and Doonesbury. A recent Doonsbury comic illustrated a mother reading a nursery rhyme to her small son:

"Peter,Peter Pumpkin Eater
Had a wife and couldn't keep her,
Put her in a pumpkin shell,
And there he kept her very well."

The mother commented: "You realize, of course, that Peter was a male sexist porker." Discuss the humor and inferences. What is a male sexist porker? How do you feel about Peter? How have attitudes toward women changed in recent years?

(3) Collect cartoons to show on the opaque or overhead projector . "What is the cartoonist trying to say? What current event prompted this cartoon? How does the cartoonist's point of view agree or disagree with your opinion on this subject?"

NEWSPAPER HUMOR: TOOL FOR CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Critical reading is a thinking skill involving personal judgment of the purposes, bias, and truthfulness of statements made in the text.

Activities for Critical Analysis of Newspaper Humor

(1) Explain that facts can be verified, while opinions cannot. Ask students to read a humorous article such as, "Ernest Borgnine, Married 5 Times, Says: 'I've Finally Found Wedded Bliss'." Categorize facts in one column and opinions in another, or underline facts in red and opinions in blue.

(2) Collect and categorize examples of propaganda devices including glittering generalities, bandwagon, transfer, card-stacking, testimonials, and plain folks.

(3) Analyze the degree of truth and reliablity in claims such as: "Straight, Black, and Beautiful" by Londun Line Curl Remover; "English Leather: The civilized way to roar;" Increase Your I.Q. up to 50%;" or "Look 20 Years Younger!"

(4) Critically analyze want ads. For example, find humor in "Sheila Wood's Have A Friend Club" from The National Enquirer. Match possible couples from descriptions. Find a woman who might wish to

correspond with G-659-G. "Handsome, lonely, one-woman man, 52. Would enjoy hearing from financially secure, lonely lassie under 55. Full length photo necessary." What are some dangers in choosing a friend from an ad?

Newspaper humor activities are motivating, fun, and informational. They provide many opportunities for practicing critical thinking and reading abilities. Try newspaper humor as a tool for teaching students of all ages to become active, thinking readers in predicting vocabulary through context, inferencing and interpreting text, and in critical analysis of facts, opinions, and propaganda.

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